

'Iconic Internationalists' and the Representation of Canada in/through Africa

David Black

Dalhousie University

blackd@dal.ca

In a commentary on Minister of International Cooperation Bev Oda's February 2009 announcement of 20 priority recipients for Canadian bilateral aid, in which eight African countries were dropped from this streamlined list, Anthony Halliday of the Canadian International Council's African Study Group asserted that:

This new policy abandons Canada's traditional emphasis on reducing poverty in the world's poorest countries, notably in Africa...

Our traditional values dictate we remain engaged with Africa (*Globe and Mail*, 3/4/2009).

What is particularly striking about this commentary is that it invokes a 'tradition' of poverty alleviation and of generosity, particularly towards Africa, that decades of scholarship has largely refuted (e.g. Freeman 1985; Pratt 1994 and 2003; Morrison 1998; Brown 2008). Why such an image still resonates so powerfully with many Canadians despite the weight of accumulated evidence is an intriguing puzzle.

Several factors help to explain our continued attachment to this benign and generous self-image. One is that it is regularly refurbished by high-profile initiatives from Canadian political leaders that are heralded as marking a 'return' to our 'true' or at least better collective selves, notwithstanding the routine pursuit of far more narrowly self-interested behaviour. This pattern of 'consistent inconsistency' (Black 1997) has often been played out on an African stage as, for example, in Brian Mulroney's engagement with South Africa in the mid-1980s, Lloyd Axworthy's attempt to mobilize opposition to the brutal Abacha regime in Nigeria in the mid-1990s, and Jean Chretien's effort to catalyze the G8 to action through the Africa Action Plan adopted at Kananaskis in 2002.

A second, more diffuse and common-sensical explanation is simply that Canadians, like members of most other societies, would generally prefer not to think ill of themselves. It is far more comforting to routinely re-invoke a sense of ourselves as relatively good, generous, and constructive 'international citizens'. The fact that Africa and its travails is generally far removed from our immediate interests and experiences conveniently enables us to sustain this self-image through intermittent attention to instances of apparent leadership and generosity, accompanied by widespread inattention to and ignorance of less attractive realities.

A third possible explanation has received less attention however. This is the role of key public figures – ‘voices’ – essentially beyond (and above) government who are seen to embody the best of this country in their activism on behalf of those who are neglected, impoverished, and abused. These figures become, in effect, icons of internationalism, reflecting our *true* or *best* selves, notwithstanding the deviations from these presumed roles perpetrated by the compromised and compromising political leaders of the day. Once again, the stage on which these iconic voices intervene is frequently African.

In this paper, two such iconic internationalists – arguably the two most prominent and popular of the contemporary era – will be highlighted: Romeo Dallaire and Stephen Lewis. These two exemplary Canadians have both become tireless advocates, for the human rights of the poor and marginalized of Africa, and for a more generous and activist Canadian foreign policy especially in relation to this poorest and most insecure of continents. Their role, it will be argued, is paradoxical. On the one hand, they have often been sharp and forceful critics of Canadian government policies and (in)actions. On the other hand, their core messages have effectively re-inscribed the potentiality and ‘naturalness’ or ‘rightfulness’ of a good and generous Canada, operating principally in a reinvigorated and UN-centred multilateral context. More broadly, they themselves have come to embody and symbolize the best of Canada in the world, in ways that enable us to continue to believe in this image.

This paper starts by briefly exploring the important role of Africa in the socialization of key segments of the Canadian ‘political class’ in the post-decolonization (post-1960) era. It then assesses the messages – both explicit and embodied – articulated by Dallaire and Lewis respectively, before assessing the roles these messages have played in sustaining a benign and hegemonic sense of our global selves.

Africa and the Canadian public/political elite

It is noteworthy that an influential minority of those who came to dominate Canadian public life and political discourse through much of the past two generations had formative experiences in the Africa that emerged from colonial rule in the 1960s, ‘70s, and ‘80s. Stephen Lewis was one of these; his prose on the experience is illuminating:

It must be understood, without any hint of heady romanticism, that Africa in the 1950s and 1960s... was a continent of vitality, growth, and boundless expectation. It got into your blood, your viscera, your heart. The bonds were not just durable, they were unbreakable. There was something intoxicating about an environment of such hope, anticipation, affection, energy, indomitability. The Africa I knew was poor, but it... was absolutely certain that it could triumph over every exigency (Lewis 2005: 44).

Lewis has become perhaps the best known of these 'Africa-affected' Canadians, but he was hardly alone. Their number include, for example, Gerald Caplan, Steven Langdon, Rick Salutin, David MacDonald, and the two senior (ex-)diplomats recently released from captivity by an al-Qaeda linked cell in Mali, Robert Fowler and Louis Guay. They were often volunteers (for example, with CUSO and other secular or faith-based NGOs). Similarly, the Quebec of the Quiet Revolution and the federal government's parallel efforts to foster bilingualism and biculturalism were shaped externally by the two jurisdictions' often competing efforts to forge relationships with francophone Africa – relationships that built on a long history of Quebecois missionary involvement in Africa.¹ [I NEED TO TRACK THIS FURTHER] Some of the people affected by these formative encounters stayed closely involved in African and development issues; others did not, or at any rate did so only intermittently. But their coming of age along with an Africa emerging from the bonds of colonialism and imperialism has arguably given African issues and images a particular resonance in Canadian imaginings of internationalism, alongside a much more hard-nosed and muscular internationalism of pragmatism and NATO 'alliancemanhip'. This is so despite – indeed perhaps because of – the relatively limited and remote character of Canada's security and economic links to the continent, and its status as the single largest focus of Canadian development assistance efforts.²

Interestingly enough, the two figures that are the focus of this paper reflect, at least in part, two distinct faces of Canadian 'humane internationalism'. Lewis reflects the welfarist/developmentalist/social democratic strand, while Romeo Dallaire, while sharing many of these values, remains a military man and loyal soldier, convinced of the necessity for muscular interventions and supportive of the Canadian military and its allies in controversial wars such as those in Kosovo and Afghanistan. Both have been indelibly shaped and moved by their African experiences, and continue to be tireless advocates for its peoples. Each has periodically served the Canadian state; indeed Dallaire returned to a formal role in Canadian public life in 2005 when he was appointed to the Senate as a Liberal representing Quebec by former Prime Minister Paul Martin. Lewis, for his part, is continuing member of the social democratic 'elite' of this country, associated with the NDP. Yet both have come to command very high levels of public support and

¹ For example, French Canadian Dominicans founded the National University of Rwanda in 1963 and in the following decade the federal government invested more than \$50 million in the institution and supplied it with key personnel. Then-Prime Minister Lester Pearson was a "chief supporter", according to Off (2000: 15).

² Africa's economic marginality should not be overstated. It has often weighed disproportionately in the strategic interests of Canadian capitalists, while its growth as a market for Canadian extractive industry trade and investment over the past decade and a half has been striking. See Freeman 1985; Black and Savage, 2008.

admiration across partisan lines, verging on heroic status.³ What messages have they used this platform and image to project?

Romeo Dallaire

The story of Dallaire's horrifying immersion in Africa has been well and widely told, not least by Dallaire himself (2003). There is no need to rehearse it here. However a few points about his experience as commander of the "benighted" (Lawson 2005) United Nations Force in Rwanda (UNAMIR) that was present to bear witness to the descent into genocide and to attempt, futilely, to ameliorate it in 1994 are worth emphasizing. First, unlike many of those leading Canadians noted above, Dallaire had essentially *no* exposure to Africa prior to being assigned to this command – as reflected in his immediate response to being offered a role in the mission: "Rwanda, that's somewhere in Africa isn't it?" (Dallaire 2003: 42). Similarly, he had no previous experience in UN "peacekeeping" missions prior to this one. In part because of this lack of experience, juxtaposed with the disastrous failure of the mission, Dallaire himself remains controversial in some circles and some parts of the world – notably in Belgium, where he was widely seen as culpable for the deaths of the 10 Belgian paratroopers that prompted the pullout of the most robust component of the UNAMIR force within days of the start of the genocide (Off 2000: 102-114). He has also been a target of more or less *sotto voce* criticism within the 'profession of arms' in Canada,⁴ and more forthright critiques among some who have studied and written about Rwanda and the genocide (e.g., Courtemanche 2005). Indeed he and his mission were, on his own analysis, used and abused by the veto-holding 'great powers' on the Security Council, a profoundly risk averse UN Secretariat, and the principle parties to the conflict in Rwanda itself.

In Canada however, such critics and critiques have, over time, been driven into the background and Dallaire has come to be widely regarded as a heroic figure, despite his explicit and repeated disavowals. This standing rests, in large measure, on the transparent courage and devotion to duty that he displayed in Rwanda, the collective witness Canadians bore to his trauma, trials and breakdown afterwards (including attempted suicide), the resilience he has shown in facing up to his own demons and his personal responsibility for the failure of UNAMIR, and the way he has come to channel his personal trauma into outspoken and tireless advocacy.

³ This is not to suggest that either has been without prominent critics in this country. However it is fair to say that they enjoy respect and admiration of most, including many who would oppose specific dimensions of their politics and policy positions. In short, it has come to be unseemly to attack them too vigorously or publicly in light of the stature they hold.

⁴ For a more forthright instance of this, see MacKenzie 2008: 209-230.

His 'causes' grow out of his experiences, and fall firmly within the 'humane internationalist' tradition. Most basically, he has become a champion of a universalist conception of human rights, passionately defending the equal rights and dignity of all people with explicit emphasis on attacking the real world tendency to treat the rights of Africans less seriously than those of 'Westerners': "We have a responsibility to protect, we do not have the right to assess and to establish a priority within humanity, for all humans are human and not one of us is more human than any other" (Dallaire 2006a). This, and his experience of the UN's failure in Rwanda, has led him to become a champion of the idea of the "Responsibility to Protect" (ICISS 2001), and in this context of more robust, timely, and effective responses to humanitarian crises such as that in Darfur (i.e., humanitarian interventions). Haunted by the children of Rwanda, he has become particularly interested in the role of youth and, in this context, the campaign against the growing use of child soldiers, providing leadership to the Child Soldier's Initiative (<http://www.childsoldiersinitiative.org/>). And, notwithstanding (or because of?) his long career involvement with NATO during the Cold War, he has become an advocate for nuclear disarmament (Dallaire 2008).

These causes have often led him to adopt positions sharply critical of the Canadian government. Admittedly, since the election of the Harper Conservatives in 2006, these criticisms from a Liberal Senator can be seen to have a partisan cast; however there can be little doubt, given his forthrightness, that he would not spare his own party on any of these (or related) issues.⁵ Yet his advocacy and his criticisms are cast within an idealized and patriotic frame of Canada's *true* vocation as a 'leading middle power'. An intervention on the crisis in Darfur is revealing on this point, and worth quoting at length:

Canadians need to realize that a large part of Sudan's intransigence can be directly linked to our own government's unwillingness to accept leadership of the UN mission in Darfur...

... It is not only the responsibility of the U.S. and other Security Council members to solve the crisis in Darfur... It now falls to Canada, as a leader of the world's middle powers, to take charge of the mission, prepare for deployment of Canadian Forces and rally other middle powers – such as Japan, Germany, India, Brazil, and the Scandinavian countries – to commit the resources and troops needed to stop the slaughter.

Canada's reputation as a leading global citizen, earned through diplomacy and our ability to send highly trained soldiers abroad, is at stake. As we

⁵ Although his criticism might be more muted and the potential for cooptation higher, as in his naming as one of former Prime Minister Martin's three high-level representatives on the issue of Darfur, along with Robert Fowler and Senator Mobina Jaffer, in 2005.

decide our next step toward Darfur, we must resolve to prevent disgracing this tradition (2006b).

Leaving aside the question of Dallaire's analysis of international politics, and whether if Canada were to 'rally other middle powers' any would follow, this intervention is revealing in a number of ways. First, it reveals Dallaire as both a deep patriot and a firm believer in and advocate of the mythologized conception of Canada as a force for good in the world. It also shows him to be, not surprisingly, a firm advocate of a robust military role in his conception of Canadian internationalism – and the Canadian Forces as a kind of spearhead for humane internationalism. In short, it underscores Dallaire's profound conviction (like Bono!) that "the world needs more Canada".

Perhaps most amazingly, given his and UNAMIR's treatment at the hands of the UN and the permanent members on the Security Council, Dallaire continues to wed his conception of Canadian internationalism and international responsibility to a firm belief in a UN-centred multilateralism, as for example in his assertion that "I still believe absolutely that the most legitimate body to authorize humanitarian intervention remains the United Nations Security Council" (Dallaire 2007). In short, and in contrast to the deep cynicism towards the UN that inhabits much of the Canadian Forces, Dallaire is not prepared to let his own experience and cynical understanding overwhelm his conviction that the UN framework offers the best, and perhaps only, way towards a more humane and effective response to human suffering. This is a viewpoint profoundly in keeping with the more idealistic or 'progressive' wing of Canadian internationalism.

In short, both in the positions Dallaire advocates and in the role he embodies, marked by courage, loyalty, dogged advocacy for the vulnerable and threatened of the world, and perhaps even a little bit of the good-hearted but slightly naïve innocent in a world marked by the cynical machinations of the more powerful, he can be seen to both reinforce and reflect the popular image of Canada as an agent of ethical internationalism. In short, he can be seen to embody our 'true' or 'better' selves, evidence to the contrary notwithstanding.

Stephen Lewis

Stephen Lewis, *Maclean's* magazine's "Canadian of the Year" in 2003, presents a somewhat more complex and difficult analytical picture. To begin, he has had a long, varied, and sustained engagement with both Africa and 'official' Canada, yet has remained in some respects a temperamental and political 'outsider' on account of his deeply held identity as a democratic socialist whose "ideology is (his) life" (Lewis 2005: 166). He is, in this respect, an 'elite of the margins' in Canadian and to some extent international (or at least Western) society(s).

Lewis has also displayed an indefatigable attachment to public service, both within Canada (as an MPP and Leader of the Official Opposition in Ontario in the

1960s and '70s, and as Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations in the 1980s) and at the UN (as Deputy Executive Director of Unicef in the 1990s, and the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa in the 2000s). Yet this has never prevented him from 'speaking truth to power' as he has interpreted it. Indeed, his sojourns in public service have often been marked towards their end by sharp criticism of his erstwhile political masters -- for example, his criticism of the Canadian government's loss of momentum on sanctions against South Africa in the late 1980s (see Valpy 1988), or his very undiplomatic critiques of institutional members of the "UN family" (particularly though not only the World Bank) while still the Secretary-General's Special Envoy, in the context of his 2005 Massey Lectures.

He has thus been a harsher and more persistent critic of various Canadian governments, especially on issues related to Africa and to development. This critical stance has been relatively comfortable, indeed habituated, for Lewis because none of these governments has shared his partisan political attachment. In his Massey Lectures, he trained his finely honed rhetorical sights on the G8 governments that had just made much of Africa at the Gleneagles Summit of 2005, and on the Canadian government in particular. He is worth quoting at length:

And then, finally, there's our own country, Canada. Here, for me, the situation is inexplicable. I have heard what the prime minister of Canada [Paul Martin] has said, and he has been good enough to talk to me directly about it. The arguments of financial incapacity are simply not persuasive.

We promised and continue to promise to reach the 0.7 percent (target for ODA to GDP). We are the author of the promise. Everyone knows that. Everyone on the international scene thinks it's the height of hypocrisy to propound the policy and then fail to meet it...

The prime minister says that there's nothing worse in internationalism than to make promises that are not kept: that's the real immorality, he argues. With respect, he's wrong. The real immorality is for one of the most wealthy and privileged countries in the world to fail to respond adequately to the life and death struggle of hundreds of millions of impoverished people (2005: 32-33).

What are we to make of this impassioned critique? Lewis is, at one level, a deep and appropriately jaded cynic concerning the likelihood that the Canadian or indeed any other western government will respond with adequate urgency, commitment, consistency, and generosity to the plight of the vast majority of Africans, including but not limited to the tens of millions who are living with HIV/AIDS and/or dealing with its aftermath. ⁶ Elsewhere, having sharply criticized G8 governments' rapid

⁶ Notably AIDS orphans and the grandmothers who have been compelled to take on extraordinary caregiving roles as a result of the pandemic.

retreat from the commitments made at Gleneagles, he writes that: "...what lies at the heart of all this... is the sordid realization that the wealthy governments of the western world simply cannot be trusted to deliver the goods" (2005: 198). In this context, like many in the development community, he tends to place relatively more faith in the non-governmental and advocacy groups that hold their governments' feet to the fire – and chastises these same groups for letting the G8 off the hook at Gleneagles by getting swept up in the false 'breakthrough' orchestrated by the UK government of Tony Blair.

Yet at another level his approach reveals a residual belief in the possibility that through reason, persuasion, and passion the Canadian and other leading governments' positions can be redeemed. As revealed above, he remains a firm believer in the necessity of more and better foreign aid, as well as debt relief and multilateral trade reform through the WTO process – all measures requiring government leadership and action. Even as he explicitly doubts the likelihood that any of these reforms will be achieved, he continues to advocate tirelessly for them – suggesting that his doubt is leavened by at least a measure of hope. A clue to his approach is provided by his rejoinder to those who charge that his proposals – in this case for a major UN specialized agency focusing on women – are unrealistic. He responds that, "I'm advancing this broad proposal ... in the hope that somewhere, some country, perhaps one of the Nordics, will run with it. I'm proposing it because sometimes at the United Nations, when you hammer home a position time and again, ad nauseum, a modest variation of that position is embraced..." (2005: 154). There is, then, in his words and thought an underlying conviction that despite all the disappointments of experience, both state and inter-state institutions (including the government of Canada) can and should become a force for good in the world.

This fundamentally reformist approach extends to the UN system where, as with Dallaire, Lewis holds to the conviction that in the end, it can and must provide the leadership to deal with the world's most pressing challenges (in this case, global poverty). For example, he writes with regard to the need for capacity building on a massive scale that, "Coordinated leadership is what's missing from any plans to deal with capacity, and I can't but believe that the leadership should come from the United Nations. Not the money, not the person power, not even the plans themselves, but most emphatically the leadership to get the job done" (2005: 176). In this respect too, then, Lewis retains his belief in the redemptive possibilities of formal public institutions – and by extension, the need for governments such as Canada's to put their energy and effort into expanding the capacity and capability of the UN system. He is, in this regard, a multilateralist of the traditional, idealist and inclusive variety – and explicitly *not* of elite, pluralist 'concerts' such as the G8 or NATO (Black and Sjolander 1996). This, too, is a view that falls comfortably within the 'progressive' tradition of Canadian internationalism, which remains firmly and often uncritically wedded to a preference for the UN over more elite, pluralist commitments.

In sum, notwithstanding his persistent criticism of the Canadian and allied governments, Lewis's own analysis and advocacy reveal a bedrock belief/hope that the government of Canada (perhaps led at some miraculous future conjuncture by the NDP?), at least some other western governments, and the multilateral bodies they compose and underwrite have the potential to become more generous and consistent contributors to the needs of the world's poorest and most vulnerable people. On this, however, he remains ambiguous and conflicted. Perhaps more to the point of this paper is that he himself has come to serve as an inspirational model of global service, in which many Canadians see reflected the kind of country they wish to be. Insofar as such a person can be embraced and lionized, across partisan and ideological lines, in this country and globally, he can be interpreted as reflecting Canada at its best. Moreover insofar as Lewis continues to attract and hold the support of those who might otherwise be inclined towards a more radical challenge to their own government, and to the global order it contributes to and benefits from, he can perhaps be seen to obviate the possibility of such a challenge and in this sense contribute, paradoxically, to the persistence of the very order he is so eloquently critical of.

Conclusion

While it would be a mistake to overstate the influence of these iconic internationalists, it is nevertheless clear that the breadth and depth of their appeal significantly outstrips most political leaders, serving and retired, in this country. In this context, they play a fascinating double role: as prominent public critics on the one hand, and as sources of inspiration and reassurance on the other. In the final analysis, their prescriptions are for *more and better* Canada, in terms of the volume, quality, consistency, and virtue of our international contributions, rather than for something fundamentally *different*. Moreover they themselves personify the ethics of commitment, service, and solidaristic engagement that many Canadians like to associate our country with. In this sense they effectively help to sustain a benign, humane internationalist collective self-image, even as they decry the deviations of Canadian governments-of-the-day from it. They help to explain why Canadian 'traditions' of commitment to poverty alleviation and human rights, notably in and through Africa, continue to resonate despite historical ambiguities and contradictions.

References (very incomplete)

Courtemanche, G. (2005). "The nightmare diaries. Romeo Dallaire gives his account of a disastrous UN command in Shake Hands with the Devil. Gil Courtemanche tries to be sympathetic." *The Guardian*, 23 April.

Dallaire, R., with Beardsley, B. (2003). *Shake Hands with the Devil. The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda*. Toronto: Random House Canada.

Dallaire, R. (2006). "History will judge Canada, not Sudan, on the fate of Darfur." *The Globe and Mail*, 14 September.

Halliday, A. (2009). "Canada is turning its back on the poorest of Africa." *The Globe and Mail*, 3 March.

Lawson, G. (2005). "Sorrows of a Hero" (Review of *Shake Hands with the Devil*). *New York Review of Books*, 52 (9), May 26.

Lewis, S. (2006). *Race Against Time*. Toronto: House of Anansi.

MacKenzie, L. (2008). *Soldiers made me Look Good*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre.

Off, C. (2000). *The Lion, the Fox, and the Eagle*. Toronto: Random House Canada.